

# Combining Conservation and Care: Indigenous People and Conservation



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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Janet Edmond and Katie Fisher prepared this overview with assistance from CI staff members and other colleagues. Thanks are due to CI staff members worldwide who reviewed drafts and provided useful comments. Contributors include: Sarah Milne in Cambodia, Zo Zatvonirina in Madagascar, V. Ivonne Sanchez in Mexico, Artemio Antolin, Juan Acay, Jr. and Marcelino Viernes in the Philippines, Susan Stone, Fred Boltz, Jason Berry, Terhi Majanen and James-Christopher Miller in Washington, DC. Special thanks are due to Tom Outlaw of USAID and Don Lauro of the Packard Foundation for their support of these projects.

This publication series is funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) under the Healthy Families, Healthy Forests project (GPH-G-00-02-00010-00 under Leader Associates Cooperative Agreement (LAG-A-00-00-00046-00), and by the David and Lucille Packard Foundation.

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# INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to give an overview of what the Population Environment (PE) program of Conservation International (CI) has done with respect to working with indigenous peoples in conservation. CI works with a variety of stakeholders and local partners to achieve sustainable natural resource conservation, and local indigenous communities are key partners helping to achieve our conservation goals in harmony with human societies. In many places around the globe, indigenous peoples are natural stewards of local resources and conservation partners.

In line with CI's Indigenous Peoples policy adopted in 1991 (CI, 1991), we identify indigenous peoples in specific geographic areas by the presence, in varying degrees, of the following factors:

- Close attachment to ancestral and traditional or customary territories and the natural resources in them;
- Customary social and political institutions;
- Economic systems oriented to subsistence production;
- An indigenous language, often different from the predominant language; and
- Self-identification and identification by others as members of a distinct cultural group.

This paper describes our work with indigenous peoples in three countries and the associated lessons learned.



*Local indigenous communities are key partners helping to achieve conservation goals.*

# Indigenous People and Conservation



*Building lasting partnerships and relationships requires leadership, commitment, and persistence.*

## MEXICO

CI's PE program has been working in southern Mexico since 2000, in an effort to meet human needs and biodiversity conservation goals in the Selva Lacandona forest, part of the Mesoamerica hotspot. This hotspot contains some of the richest biological diversity, containing 10 percent of the earth's plant and animal species. A 1997 study that ranked countries with disproportionately high biological diversity placed Mexico among the top five countries in the world for combined species diversity and endemism. Chiapas is not only the home to a significant portion of this biodiversity, but also the last remaining intact tropical rainforest in North America. In addition, Chiapas generates over half of all hydroelectric power in Mexico, five percent of the nation's oil, 12 percent of its natural gas, and 46 percent of its coffee. (PAI 2005.)

At the same time, the human population pressure from natural growth and migration to the area threatens biodiversity. Although Chiapas is one of the richest states in Mexico in terms of natural resources, the state ranks at the bottom of almost every social index, and the population is 60 percent rural. More than one-third of homes lack electricity and running water. Population growth is well above the national average. Infant mortality is twice the national average, and 40 percent of all rural people are illiterate. According to the Mexican Social Security Institute (IMSS), 55 percent of the rural indigenous population in the jungle region is adolescent, and 40 percent of all pregnancies in the jungle are considered high risk. In addition, large influxes of settlers occur each year as rural farmers come to the area in search of jobs, agricultural land, and economic opportunities.

In response to these threats, CI's PE project in Mexico, with the support of the David and Lucille Packard Foundation, has been working since 2000 on an integrated health and conservation project. In collaboration with CI, IMSS is delivering basic health services to the rural indigenous poor in 20 communities in and around the Selva Lacandona.

CI and our partners also work with three local indigenous groups, the Ch'ol in Frontera Corozal, Tzeltal in Nueva Palestina, and Mestizo in Ixcán. We work in these three towns, which border the Selva Lacandona forest. Women in these communities are participating in alternative economic activities that improve their own well-being and that of their families. On the basis of data gathered in 2001 and 2002 through initial dialogue and consultations with stakeholders in the indigenous Selva Lacandona communities, we engaged women in the target communities who were interested in developing economic alternatives and forming cooperative groups. We conducted baseline studies on community enterprise interests and potential products, and we found that embroidery, community gardens, and vegetable production generated the most interest.

During the past few years, CI has conducted many workshops in reproductive and sexual health for more than 35 women and has reached more than 70 women through technical and organizational workshops designed to increase management, negotiation, and communication skills. The goal of these trainings was to increase the range of skills among

the women participating in the three focal microenterprise groups and to foster sustainability in the group management structures.

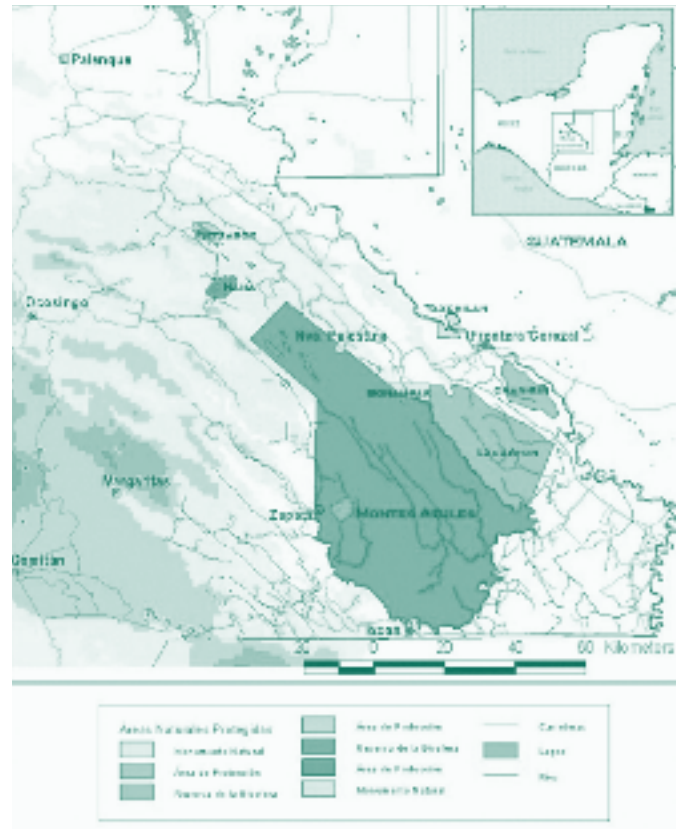
The women's groups from Frontera Corozal and Nueva Palestina continue to embroider flora and fauna species of the region on clothing to increase awareness among the general population of the importance of protecting natural resources, and the Nich Ma'te'el (Frontera Corozal) group—the most independent—has negotiated a loan to buy materials and has explored marketing options for their products. In addition, a group of 20 women from Ixcán have participated in household gardening.

Although the microenterprise target communities are all in the same region, significant cultural differences seem to have influenced the results obtained in each of the groups. Some groups were able to develop organizationally while others struggled.

The Ts'unun group (Nueva Palestina) has been working together for nine years, and there have been many conflicts within the group. Some women expressed concern that the president of their group looks at the project as her personal enterprise. Training for this group focused on the technical aspects of the microenterprise project.



CI staff with indigenous women in the Selva Lacandona, Mexico.



Map Selva Lacandona, Mexico.

The women of Nich Ma'te'el (Frontera Corozal) have formed a solid group, and we are seeing positive results more quickly than expected. This group obtained a three-year loan to buy sewing machines, thread, and cloth, and they solicited training from other organizations. They are an example of a group working well within the community, because they give assistance to other women who are looking for technical, organizational, and financial support. CI continued to leverage funds to ensure sustainability and helped the community in Frontera Corozal to submit a small proposal to the US Agency for International Development (USAID) in Mexico to support a training center. The community secured funds to build the center, with CI's help, through the support of the David and Lucille Packard Foundation. This USAID funding will help provide electricity and furnishings to support the women's groups.

To ensure sustainability of the group after the CI project ends in 2005, CI has worked with Na Bolom to continue supporting this group at the local level. Na Bolom is a national and regional group dedicated to preserving the indigenous culture of Chiapas. During the past year, Na



Bolom has helped train the women to design and create forest and fauna toys to highlight biodiversity for tourism. This training involves workshops on production skills such as sewing and painting, as well as marketing skills. Na Bolom is also representing the women's group with local authorities and ensuring access to the training center and appropriate support for these activities.

In response to increased community demand for condoms, the Ixcán group recently started social marketing of condoms in their community. Given its proximity to the border and military installations, Ixcán has experienced a high level of immigration and prostitution, and health centers report increasing incidences of sexually transmitted diseases. As a separate activity, CI and Marie Stopes International (MSI), an international family planning organization with a local office in Chiapas, started promoting the social marketing of condoms with key stakeholders such as IMSS medical unit staff members, local authorities, and midwives in the



Indigenous woman and baby in Chiapas, Mexico.



Women creating handicrafts with microenterprise groups.

community. When the microenterprise group learned of the potential for income generation through social marketing of condoms, the group pursued this initiative and agreed to work with MSI to plan for future activities.

## THE PHILIPPINES

In the Philippines, CI works in the northern Sierra Madre Biodiversity Corridor to conserve biodiversity such as the endangered Philippine Eagle, the country's national bird, and other globally threatened endemic species like the Philippine crocodile. As part of these activities, CI has implemented an integrated health and conservation project with local communities since 2002. One of the main conservation objectives is to improve the management of the community-based forest concessions in key biodiversity areas, through appropriate land use planning and zoning and capacity building of target communities and community-based forest management committees (CBFM).

In terms of indigenous groups, CI works with local established people's organizations (POs), government-recognized groups of indigenous people with natural resource rights in the area. The first inhabitants of the forests of the Sierra Madre, the Agta are a local nomadic group that sustains its living by hunting, fishing, and collecting wild fruit. They are a target population for the government-sponsored Certificate of Ancestral Domain Claims (CADCs) in recognition of their ancestral rights. CI helps with technical assistance and management and enforcement training for POs, CBFM committees, and other groups with lands under Certificates

of Ancestral Domain, focusing on agroforestry, and with improved forest management to conserve these critical biodiversity resources.

Our activities with indigenous people have included training in 2003 for 47 indigenous community members along with barangay health workers (BHWs) and midwives (hilots) in reproductive health and family planning (RH/FP) information and service delivery at project outset. From July to December 2004, the Local Government Unit committed to additional support to BHWs in the remote areas, particularly communities along the coastal areas (Valley Cove) where the indigenous Agta people live, allowing delivery of RH/FP services.

In addition, POs and indigenous communities were involved in biological survey data collection, used to strengthen CBFM and CADC management plans. Data collection also helped build local capacity among the Agta to monitor biodiversity over the long-term. From 2002 to 2003, CI worked with local governments and groups to obtain prior informed consent approvals from indigenous and local communities before survey work was begun, and to include them in the data collection process. This effort yielded important information on wildlife species in the area and helped lead POs to establish community nurseries. Subsequent evaluations of violation reports led to the use of CI training modules to reinforce capacity of POs to manage their projects



Children in Chiapas, Mexico.





CI Philippines staff reach out to local indigenous groups in northern Philippines.

## CAMBODIA

CI works in the Central Cardamoms Protected Forest in southwestern Cambodia, which is of key biological interest because of species richness, particularly one of the last populations of the critically endangered Siamese crocodile. The communities living in and around the forest include the Khmer Daeum, who have been living there for generations and have a more advanced understanding of the forest than other local communities. Unfortunately, years of civil conflict and forced relocations by the Khmer Rouge have left the population impoverished and in search of improved welfare.

CI has been working with the local communities and Khmer Daeum to design innovative approaches to forest management and conflict resolution using Participatory Land Use Planning (PLUP) tools. The community-based planning process analyzes how the Khmer Daeum use their land and identifies unsustainable practices. The planning process leads to democratically elected commune boards, which carry out the community plans. From November to December 2004, the PLUP process initiated democratic elec-

tion of local institutions in each commune, and in Tatai Leu commune, the chief of the commune is a young indigenous woman.

At the same time, CI has worked with Save Cambodia's Wildlife (SCW), a small Cambodian nongovernmental organization, to reach local community members with information about the importance of biodiversity conservation in their areas. SCW produced storybooks using local legends about the forest and its magical powers as the basis for conservation and health messages. Many indigenous people in Cambodia have beliefs that are protective of wildlife, which assist conservation efforts. For example, indigenous people may not eat certain wild species because they believe they are protecting forest spirits, or they believe if a man goes out to hunt these species, his wife will become sick. Some of these beliefs offer opportunities for conservation. Other beliefs, such as that consuming snakes and tigers will increase one's strength, can contradict conservation objectives.

In addition, CI sponsored five commune council and community members to attend a consultation forum on indigenous communal land titles for three days in September



2004. This effort is important because it compliments the PLUP process and land use processes.

## LESSONS LEARNED

Although CI's work with indigenous groups varies by country, we have learned several lessons during the past few years.

- Indigenous people and organizations are important players in conservation sustainability. Opening dialogue and engaging these groups and stakeholders is essential to achieving lasting conservation effects in any hotspot.
- Building lasting indigenous partnerships for conservation requires organizations to respect indigenous people's customs, traditions, and laws throughout the project—from planning and implementing the project to monitoring and evaluating its results. Sometimes project implementers bring packages of interventions without considering



Cambodian mother and child.



People in the Cardamom Mountains, Cambodia.

the customs, traditions, and customary laws of indigenous groups, and the project fails.

- Building lasting partnerships and relationships requires leadership, commitment, and persistence. Working with indigenous people and groups greatly enhances and facilitates progress, but it takes time to cultivate these relationships in mutually beneficial partnerships.

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## PHOTO CREDITS

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Inside Cover: CI Cambodia

Page 1: Introduction: CI Cambodia

Page 2: CI Mexico

Page 3: top: CI Mexico; map: CI Mexico

Page 4: top: CI Mexico; bottom: CI Mexico

Page 5: CI Mexico

Page 6: CI Mexico

Page 7: top: CI Cambodia; bottom: CI Cambodia



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